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A PLEA FOR THE STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF NORTHERN EUROPE

THE earlier history of northern, or more especially of north-eastern, Europe has as yet attracted but small attention from western scholars. In England and America the ignorance about it is most profound, and the students who have contributed anything of value in this field could be counted on one's fingers. To be sure, the Germans have been too near the scene of action to neglect it entirely, while the French have at one time or another illuminated the history of the north with works ranging all the way from the most brilliant literature to the best fruits of modern scholarship. Thus it is hardly too much to say that the reputation of Charles XII. in the west is due rather to the famous biography by Voltaire than to his own character and actions, and most of the best foreign authorities on Russia to-day are to be found in France. Still, little enough is generally known about such subjects. The educated public has a vague idea that Gustavus Adolphus suddenly appeared from a hitherto unknown country, like a *deus ex machina*, to save the cause of Protestantism, and that Peter the Great forcibly converted a nation of barbarians, with no past worth troubling about, into a state with at least the superficial semblance of a civilized power. Even historians seldom realize that the interference of Gustavus in Germany may have been, from a Swedish point of view, "a serious blunder."¹ Indeed, his previous campaigns in Poland, though accidentally connected with the Thirty Years' War, and serving as a preparation for his part in it, were due to entirely independent circumstances, and would have taken place if the rest of the world had been at peace. Peter the Great likewise had predecessors who paved the way for his reforms, and the Russia which he turned into new channels can only be understood by a careful review of her previous history.

There are plainly three reasons which may make the study of northern Europe of value to us. On the first of these—the importance of Russia in the world to-day—we need not dwell, for

¹ *Charles XII.*, by Nisbet Bain.

everything connected with the development and conditions of such a mighty empire is obviously worth our attention. Its inhabitants, too, are a gifted people, destined to play more and more a leading part in the future of mankind. The truth of this, though insufficiently realized, is too evident for discussion. For her part, Scandinavia, which is holding her own well in literature and art, still has to be counted in politics. We must remember also that the great questions of the past are by no means all settled. The antagonism of the German and the Slav is as intense as ever; the dominion of the Baltic is as undetermined as that of the Mediterranean; Poland is dead, but the Polish nationality is full of life, gaining rather than losing strength in a way that makes its ultimate fate difficult to predict.

In the second place, we have to consider the influence the Scandinavians and Slavs have had on the western countries. We must begin by admitting that as regards institutions this has been slight. It is true that in Holstein the Dane has been but recently dislodged; and in the manners and life of the inhabitants of Pomerania, Brandenburg, or Austria, traces of Slav predecessors may reward the patient investigator, but, generally speaking, the interchange of ideas between the German and his more barbarous neighbors has been one-sided. On the other hand, no one can be well versed in the history of Germany without a study of the *Drang nach Osten*. For the fortunes of the Teutonic race the battle of Tannenberg was more momentous than that of Legnano, and the results of the colonization of the land beyond the Elbe and of the conquest of Prussia outweigh the brilliant but transitory glories of the struggle between the Empire and the Papacy. Even a survey of German civic institutions is incomplete without a knowledge of their workings in Stockholm, Riga, and Cracow. If we pass to Rome and the Church, we perceive that in the plans of the Jesuits and other leaders of the Catholic reaction, Poland and even Sweden at one time held a foremost place, while the dreams and enterprises of the Holy See, in her dealings with Russia, since the council of Florence, form a curious yet unfinished chapter of history. It was a pope that suggested and brought about the marriage between a tsar of Moscow and the heir of the last emperor of Constantinople. In fact, the Catholic Church has always looked to the east as well as to the west, more than once making concessions in the former quarter that she has sternly refused in the latter. On its side, the north, after the beginning of the seventeenth century, on several occasions interfered actively in the general affairs of Europe, in which

it took a more and more active part. Gustavus II. of Sweden arrested the progress of German Catholicism after Christian IV. of Denmark had failed in the attempt to do so. The ministers of the boy king Charles XI. joined the Triple Alliance, which checked the policy of Louis XIV.; while the Pole Sobieski dealt him a serious blow by saving Vienna from the Turks. The intervention of Charles XII., at one time not improbable, might have turned the balance either way in the war of the Spanish succession; Elizabeth of Russia was the most successful adversary of Frederick the Great, and Alexander I. triumphed over Napoleon.

When we turn to the history of Scandinavia, Poland, and Russia, for those peculiar features, or workings of great principles, that make a third reason for study and comparison, we have, in view of the endless variety of detail, to be on our guard against hasty generalization. All I shall attempt to point out here is a few salient features that call for attention.

One of the most important of these is the fact that we do not meet with the unity that so long prevailed in western Europe; no pope or emperor was recognized, however imperfectly, as the head of the community of Christendom. On the contrary, from the first we have the bitterest conflict of race and religion, hence the feeling of nationality seems always to have been intense, except for a time in the upper classes under the cosmopolitanism of the eighteenth century. The Russian, the Pole, the Dane, and the Swede were actively hostile to one another, as such, if not at an earlier date chronologically, at least at an earlier stage in their development than was often the case in the lands to the west of them. Each is, even now, hardly reconciled to his rivals. The fusion of conquering and conquered peoples was apt to be exceedingly slow; for instance, nearly seven hundred years of German predominance over inferior races have left the German and the Germanized with hardly more than eight per cent of the population of the Baltic provinces. True, there were instances of peaceful absorption of Slavs by Germans, as in Pomerania and Silesia, but this process was checked in Poland by a distinct national reaction in the beginning of the fourteenth century; nay, long before this, when their country was first converted to Christianity, the Poles, unable as yet to furnish their own clergy, called in foreigners from France and Italy rather than from their near neighbor the Empire. Even Panslavism was preached by the Servian monk Kryzhanich two hundred and fifty years ago. It would be easy to multiply such examples of national consciousness. In Moscow it reached a degree of Oriental isolation unsurpassed by

the Chinese, and yet, like the Chinese, the Muscovites have shown a remarkable capacity for assimilating foreign elements. The reasons for these phenomena are complicated enough; indeed, to the student of the difficult and fascinating question as to why one race, or language, tends to prevail over another, the history of northern Europe is full of problems of the deepest interest.

This applies equally when we come to matters of religion. Russia is the one mighty empire converted to the Greek Orthodox form of faith. She offers us the best chance to examine the effect of the ideas and the belief of Constantinople, imparted to a fresh, uncivilized people.

After the fall of the Rome on the Bosphorus, Moscow was hailed as the third Rome that was to rule the world, and its prince as the one monarch who maintained the true belief undefiled by Latin heresies. Here we find no conflict between the state and a clergy which was kept in a Byzantine subservience to its sovereigns, yet the hold which the Church had on the people was tremendous. In the time of trial they clung to it with unwavering steadfastness. Thus western Protestantism never had an influence upon Holy Russia itself until recent years, though it made a few converts among the Russian nobles of Lithuania. Against the many open or insidious attacks of its ancient foe, Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy also held its own. Ivan III., with all his people, rejected scornfully the reconciliation effected by the council of Florence, and the dreams of so many popes of winning over the northern power have always been chimerical. We see, too, in the north of Europe, even more than elsewhere, the close, if subtle, connection between religion and nationality. To the uneducated Russian to-day the Protestant is a German, and the Catholic a Pole, as naturally and inevitably as the Mussulman is a Turk or Tartar.

Poland for her part has been the greatest battle-ground of the Greek and Latin faiths. Her eastern division, Lithuania, was chiefly inhabited by Orthodox Russians; in fact, it appeared at one time as if the pagan Lithuanians themselves would soon accept the same creed, had not a marriage for political reasons, the first step in the persevering policy of the Polish aristocracy, changed the natural course of affairs. By the conversion of Jagello of Lithuania and his marriage to Hedwiga of Poland in 1386 the two states were drawn together by a bond that was continually tightened till they were merged into one by the union of Lublin in 1569. White and Little Russia were long separated from Great Russia, to become part of a country in communion with the west,

their nobility in time adopting more and more the Polish language and belief. For a space, indeed, Poland herself seemed likely to be untrue to Rome, for Protestantism spread rapidly and superficially among her nobles, greedy for church wealth, and took deeper root in the German portion of the population; but when the day of reaction came, when the Jesuits who had been brought into the land set to work with marvellous skill and activity, Protestantism, except among the Germans, vanished after a feeble resistance. Against Greek Orthodoxy, however, the ability and learning of the Jesuits, supported by all the intolerance of king and noble, had a far more serious conflict. The Catholic Church only triumphed by a compromise such as was refused to the reformers of Germany. The United Greeks were not only allowed to have married priests, but kept their Slav liturgy; yet even the attempt to impose this compromise was perhaps the chief cause of the desperate insurrection of the Cossacks, ending in the loss of Kiev and the Ukraine, which marks the beginning of the fall of Poland.

The rôle of Sweden in the religious history of Europe needs no comment; we shall but note that the Reformation, complete as was its success, was not in answer to any popular demand, but was peaceably brought about by an able ruler for worldly reasons.

Turning now to questions of government and constitutional development, here also we find much to interest us, including examples of many kinds, with striking cases both of similarity and contrast. Take, for instance, Poland and Russia. In the tenth century we behold them settled by tribes of the same race, at the same primitive stage of development, with the same general political organization and institutions. The lands inhabited by the two peoples were similar, with hardly a pretence of natural geographical divisions where one should end and the other begin. Compare this with the situation of the two nations six hundred years later, when not only was one ardently Catholic and the other the sole great Orthodox power, but Russia had become an eastern despotism, where the proudest boiar called himself the slave of the tsar; while in Poland the authority of the king had sunk to a shadow, and the nobility, under the name of "golden liberties," had gradually elaborated the most impracticable constitution ever found in a civilized country. Among other distinctive features in Russia, we have also the brief but instructive history of States-Generals that at one time had a very real authority; in Poland, the tale of the long conflict between the Magnates and the Szlachta, or democratic gentry; in Denmark we find the aris-

tocracy, by its privileges and unpatriotic selfishness, crippling the state at the most critical moments, in a way that was only less fatal than was the case in Poland ; in Sweden the contest between the nobles and the crown had more vicissitudes than anywhere else, even if they were not always marked by great bitterness of feeling. During the three centuries from Gustavus I. to Gustavus III., the balance of power changed from one side to the other eight times, with the varying fortunes of Sweden, and the ability of her sovereigns, which for a long time was far above the average.

It is true that in the domain of local government we meet with less variety ; the cities of Poland had mostly Magdeburg or Culm rights, and German influence was equally strong in Scandinavia. In Russia, on the other hand, we find a totally different development. The Veche or popular assembly, of which we must remember that there is no trace in Poland, existed from early times in most, if not in all, of the towns. Especially the history and character of Novgorod the Great, and of her younger sisters, Pskov and Viatka, are well worth the attention of students of civic institutions.

Finally, to those who are interested in the influence of physical geography on character and history ; to the investigators of the life, conditions, and progress of all classes of society, at different ages ; to the lover of folklore, dramatic incident, picturesque biography, and military strategy, as well as to the student of political economy, commerce, or literature, the history of northern Europe offers a field that will richly repay the labor devoted to it.

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